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# Urban Life through Moments of Poetry: A Probe into Sarathchandra Walpola's *Es Dolahak Haya Widihak*

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## Introduction

The veteran writer Sarathchandra Walpola's new poetry collection *Es Dolahak Haya Widihak* ('Twelve Eyes, Six Dimensions'), a Silika Publication of 2024, unfolds diverse perspectives on contemporary urban social experience. This collection which consists of thirty-four (34) poems, depicts different aspects of Colombo-centred life (වෙඩිවර්ධන, as cited in වල්පොල, 2024, p 9) as its central theme, as viewed mainly from a modernist point of view. In doing so, the author has employed a free-verse style with natural speech rhythms, with a choice of an informal vocabulary, particularly those commonly

found in the city. He appears to have responded to the peculiar appeal in city life with its dreary, mundane existence with its joys and sorrows, the beauty and the crudeness, as inherent to humankind. Suffering is a fundamental sensation to humanity that pervades life in both the village and the city alike. In comparison with life in the village, there may be more corruption and hypocrisy in the city. It may not have the scenic beauty of the village. It is this life of the city that Walpola portrays in his anthology.

**Review Method**

Textual analysis has been employed as the key method in reviewing this collection of poetry, while archival research in the form of published biographies of, and interviews with, the author, have been used to a moderate extent. By using these methods, the present review intends to make a nuanced interpretation of the entries in the text, and thereby to make an attempt to add to the understanding of the impact of the text as a whole.

## Analysis

As stated earlier, the entries in this collection of poetry are focused in the direction of a deep exploration of life in Colombo city and its varied related aspects of existence. The poet does this by surfing through diverse zones of the lives and experiences of people belonging to various different strata of urban society.

### Monologue into Dialogue

The writer mentions in his opening notes to the book (වල්ගොඩ, 2024) that he opts to remain silent between the dialogue and the monologue. As Buber (2002) argues (as cited in Mizdrak, 2018), dialogue completes the space between one individual and another, forming a bond of reciprocity. Walpola's statement thus becomes significant in that each of the entries in the collection of poetry has originated as the poet's own monologue which instantly starts a dialogue with the reader. This is so because these poems are creations which directly address the society where we live, enfolding the reader with empathy for the suffering of fellow humans. At the hands of the reading public, the poems do not remain

monologues anymore. In the poem *Swayam Nirodhayanaya* ('Self-Quarantine', p. 64) the poet sensitizes the reader to the depressingly drab uncertainties of life, referring to the Covid-19 pandemic as the context, where life had to be imprisoned in self-isolation on encountering a totally unforeseen threat to human health. He does this by drawing parallels between the urban surroundings and life amid the pandemic.

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(ස්වයං නිරෝධායනය, p. 64)

Though a scorching noon

Life, a bleak wretched cave

Without pre-determined schedules

(Translation mine)

**Social Critique through Imagery**

Conservative opinion, when felt as detrimental to society, is problematized by the author. *Kolu Petiyek Upadinakam* ('Awaiting a Baby Boy', pp.29-31) which implicitly questions, and also subverts, a patriarchal social order, is one such instance. He uses evocative imagery and metaphors to communicate these ideas and invoke strong feelings in the reader, which can be frequently seen in the poems of this collection.

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(කොලු පැටියෙක් උපදිනකං, p.31)

From ward to ward

Blossoms of milky fragrance

Her bed, too, smelling of milk,

On that bed, breathing

A poem, roseate.

(Translation mine)

Walpola's use of novel imagery can be described as capable of expanding the bounds of poetic imagination. For instance, in the poem *Mathrukawak Nethi Rachanyak, Wedikawak Nethi Naluwek* ('Essay without a Topic, Actor without a Stage', pp.102-103) he alludes to the frequent flooding at Athuraliya, a rural area of southern Sri Lanka, through a metaphorical analogue of the plight of an ever surrendering, ever helpless human.

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River of the Matara crocodile hatchling

Flooding unrestrained

To all the waters of strong-tea hue

Athuraliya, that surrenders, with both hands up

(Translation mine)

**Foundational Liberal Values**

The liberal Marxist principles (Pitts, 2020) which the poet seems to uphold permeate through the entries in this anthology. Poems such as *Sapatheru Wiyamana* (‘Cobbler’s Weave’, p. 32), *Curtain call* (original poem by the same name p.33-35), *Gramiya Kirulapone Nagarika Moda Ela hewath Kaka Sandesaya* (‘Rural Kirulapone Urban Canal or The Raven’s Message’, p.79) can be cited as some examples for this. The marginalized groups of the society who are without power and thus without a voice, are regarded with empathy in the poem *Sapatheru Wiyamana* (‘Cobbler’s Weave’, p.32).

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(සපතේරු වියමන, p. 32)

Torn, chipped and peeling

Life, put together with glue

Unfit to mend

Non-verbal people

(Translation mine)

In a world where everything, including the freedom of speech, is decided by power, those who do not own capital – neither economic nor social – are bound to remain voiceless.

## Perception and Misinterpretation

As each individual person carries a social-cultural baggage, different people may regard a phenomenon with diverse perspectives. Concurrently, there can also be a majority perspective on certain occurrences in life, which makes many people view phenomena in pre-conceived

ways. In the poem ‘Curtain Call’ (the name of the poem in the original collection) the author/poet depicts the traumatic experience of the one person who chooses to take a totally different stance from the majority. Out of sheer spontaneous joy on viewing a play, this person offers his worn-out pair of slippers to its female dramatist when others shower her with elaborate tokens of admiration and appreciation.

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(Curtain Call, pp. 34-35)

Bouquets of flowers

Mementos elaborate

Offered to her in many

the privileged in the audience

….

He owned

a blooming heart

A pair of threadbare,

crooked-strapped slippers of rubber

which, faithfully removing,

taking in both hands,

offered he,

to the creative genius.

She, in attempt to

hide disgust

(Translation mine)

Using ordinary words, but carefully chosen to denote human emotion, the poet creates a strong impression on the reader of the disparity between the affluent and the poor, lack of empathy of the masses and the misinterpretation of honesty.

## Contextual Use of Language

The language in Walpola's poetry, like his subject matter, is not bound by conventional constraints. He constantly adapts his language to fit the emotional and social experiences he depicts in his poems. The inherent flexibility of the language in poetry has been emphasized and adopted by literary figures across the world, postulating that poetry should contain language that constantly evolves to make it fit enough to express

shifting human emotions and complexities (Szymborska, 1996).

## Conclusion

When considering the contemporary Sinhala poetry, works that articulate the urban pulse are a rarity. The very attempt to produce poetry that centres around Colombo life can be viewed as a bold move, and to produce impactful poetry in the chosen setting is a commendable move. Thus, the anthology *Es Dolahak Haya Widihak* ('Twelve Eyes, Six Dimensions') penned by the contemporary poet Saratchandra Walpola can be situated in the current literary scenario as a mature rendition of urban identity with its pleasures, agonies and sensations depicted through a multi-dimensional approach.

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